



The Sixty-ninth Season of
The William Nelson Cromwell and F. Lammot Belin
Concerts

National Gallery of Art
2,801st Concert

Trio con Brio Copenhagen

Jens Elvekjaer, *piano*

Soo-Jin Hong, *violin*

Soo-Kyung Hong, *cello*

October 20, 2010
Wednesday, 12:10 pm
West Building Lecture Hall

Admission free

Program

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921)

Piano Trio no. 1 in F Major, op. 18 (1863)

Allegro vivace

Andante

Scherzo

Allegro

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Piano Trio (1914)

Modéré

Pantoum — Assez vif

Passacaille — Très large

Final — Animé

The Musicians

There are times when two plus two can equal three. Trio con Brio Copenhagen is one such instance, where family ties, cultural blending, and musical connections all converge to color, shape, and energize their concerts. Korean sisters Soo-Jin and Soo-Kyung Hong and Danish pianist Jens Elvekjaer formed the trio in 1999 with the concept of pairs coming together. The sisters had played together since childhood, and Jens Elvekjaer and Soo-Kyung Hong (who are now married) had played piano and cello duos together for years.

In 2005 Trio con Brio Copenhagen was the recipient of the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson International Trio Award. The biennial award included appearances on twenty major concert series across the United States and introduced the piano trio to American audiences. The Trio first garnered international attention when they won the top prize at Germany's ARD-Munich Competition in 2002. Other awards include first prize in the Danish Radio Competition, Italy's Premio Vittorio Gui (Florence), and Norway's Trondheim Chamber Music Competition. The ensemble also won the "Allianz Prize" for Best Ensemble in Germany's Festspiele Mecklenburg-Vorpommern; second prize in the Vienna Haydn Competition; and the Premio Trio di Trieste in Italy.

Trio con Brio Copenhagen has performed in Asia, Europe, and the United States, including performances at Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, Berlin's Konzerthaus, Bonn's Beethoven-Haus, Copenhagen's Tivoli Concert Hall, Hamburg's Musikhalle, Korea's Seoul and Sejong Arts Centers, Munich's Herkulesaal, New York's Avery Fisher and Carnegie Halls, Norway's Bergen and Trondheim Chamber Music Festivals, Salzburg's Mozarteum, Sweden's Båstad Chamber Music Festival, Tokyo's Bunka Kaikan, Vicenza's Teatro Olimpico, and Vienna's Mozart-Saal.

Trio con Brio Copenhagen performed the complete Beethoven piano trios in a cycle of three concerts at the Tivoli Concert Hall in Copenhagen with great success. The Trio has been heard on the BBC, Danish Radio, European Broadcasting Union, Korean Broadcasting Systems, Norwegian Radio, Swedish Radio, Radiotelevisione Italiana, and on the major German

networks (ARD, NDR, Hessischer Rundfunk and Radio Berlin). Trio con Brio Copenhagen has released three CDs. Their first release, on the Kaba label, features Beethoven's "Ghost" Trio and the Shostakovich *Trio no. 2*; their next release, on the Azica label, includes works by Bloch, Dvořák, and Ravel; and their latest, a Marquis release, is of Mendelssohn's *Piano Trios nos. 1 and 2*.

Soo-Jin Hong plays a violin built by Andrea Guarneri in the seventeenth century; Soo-Kyung Hong plays a Testore cello from 1731; and Jens Elvekjaer is the first Steinway Artist from Denmark. Trio con Brio Copenhagen appears at the National Gallery by arrangement with Lisa Sapinkopf Artists of Emeryville, California. More information is available at www.trioconbrio.dk.

Program Notes

During the third quarter of the nineteenth century, when the French only seemed interested in opera, Camille Saint-Saëns almost single-handedly attempted to make the case for chamber music, which so many of his countrymen continued to think of as something German. Although famous for his larger orchestral works and concertos, he devoted a great deal of time and effort to writing chamber music. In addition to his two string quartets, he composed three works for piano trio; a serenade for piano, organ, violin, and viola (or cello); a piano quintet; *Caprice on Danish and Russian Aires* for piano, flute, oboe, and B-flat clarinet; and his *Septet* for piano, trumpet, two violins, viola, cello, and bass. Although the *Piano Trio no. 1* is a relatively early work, by the time he wrote it Saint-Saëns had already composed his piano quintet, a piano trio suite, and a serenade for violin, viola, and organ.

The well-respected critic, Emile Baumann, wrote:

The *First Piano Trio* is one of the most inspired moments of his youth. The opening theme of the first movement, *Allegro vivace*, expresses the joy of adventure. Its alluring gaiety communicates itself to the cello and permeates passages that are heavy with foreboding as well as those that are buoyant. The following *Andante* is a model of plastic and expressive melody. The main theme unfolds like an ancient ballad while the conclusion is filled with an intimate tenderness. The sprightly third movement, *Scherzo*, is filled with humor and wonderful cross rhythms and pizzicato effects. Much of the same buoyant spirit of the first movement is also to be found in the boisterous finale, *Allegro*.

According to the composer, the spirit of *Piano Trio no. 1* stands in stark contrast to that of *Piano Trio no. 2*. He wrote: "I am working quietly away at a trio which I hope will drive to despair all those unlucky enough to hear it."

By 1914 Ravel had already been toying with the idea of writing a piano trio for some eight years and is even reported to have said to his friend and pupil Maurice Delage: "I've written my trio. Now all I need are the themes."

But in an autobiographical note he dictated in 1928 his only comment on the completed work was that it was “Basque in coloring.” This puzzled commentators until, some years after Ravel’s death, the opening theme of the first movement was discovered among sketches for his unfinished work for piano and orchestra *Zaspiak Bat* (“The Seven Provinces”), based on Basque themes.

The first movement is in sonata form, but inevitably Ravel introduces his own modifications, as with the second theme, which appears unconventionally in the tonic A minor. In the development, Ravel builds up tension by means of continually fluctuating tempi, while at the reprise the first theme on the piano is reduced to its 3+2+3 rhythm in order to accommodate the simultaneous presentation of the second theme on the strings. It is worth noting that Ravel spoke admiringly of the reprise in the first movement of Mendelssohn’s *Violin Concerto*, likewise disguised. In the matter of instrumental balance, Ravel frequently doubles violin and cello at a distance of two octaves, placing the right hand of the piano between them.

The title of the second movement, *Pantoum*, is derived from a Malay verse form, imitated by Hugo, Gautier, and Baudelaire among others, in which the second and fourth lines of each quatrain become the first and third lines of the next. For years it was rather casually assumed that in adopting this title Ravel was merely indulging vague, exotic inclinations. But nothing about Ravel’s composing was ever vague. In 1975 the British scholar Brian Newbould proved that Ravel does in fact adhere closely to the structure outlined above and, what is more, observes a further requirement of the original form—that the poem (or movement) deal with two separate ideas pursued in parallel, in this case, the brittle opening theme on the piano and the subsequent smoother one on strings two octaves apart. Each of these themes thus has a real continuation (which we hear in performance) and a notional one (which is unheard but provided the composer a private satisfaction).

These exigencies would be enough to keep most composers occupied, but Ravel goes one step further and superimposes these games on a traditional ABA form, whose middle section is in a different meter. It could be that he was trying to outdo Debussy, who had set Baudelaire’s pantoum

“Harmonie du soir” in 1889. But at any rate this extraordinarily intricate structure lends some credence to his remark about only needing the themes. In contrast to the whirling motion of the *Pantoum*, the *Passacaille* that follows is obsessively linear — eleven statements of an eight-bar phrase, rising to a climax and then receding again. Even more than the *Pantoum*, this movement is a tribute to the teaching of André Gedalge, to whom the work is dedicated, and to whom Ravel was ever grateful for his technical advice. In the last movement, the alternation of 5/4 and 7/4 bars returns to the metric instability of the first movement, but the structure is even more firmly that of sonata form with a second theme in the shape of massive piano chords. Ravel’s work on this movement coincided with the declaration of war in August 1914, which may possibly explain the trumpet calls in the development. Typically, he wrote off this work, in which his technical mastery is seen in all its dazzling perfection, as “just another trio.”

That disclaimer was, however, to some extent for public consumption. In his heart, Ravel was passionate about compositional technique and about his role in its progress. To close friends he would occasionally confide: “Well, you know, nobody has ever done that before!”

Program notes by Lisa Sapinkopf

Next Week at the National Gallery of Art

Great Noise Ensemble
Armando Bayolo, conductor

Music by Louis Andriessen

October 24, 2010
Sunday Evening, 6:30 pm
East Building Atrium

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